

Questions Abound

By Lawrence Meyer

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Sometime during the Christmas week of 1972, then-acting FBI Director L. Patrick Gray III took a sheaf of classified documents from his Stonington, Conn., house and burned them with assorted paper, ribbons and bows collected during the seasonal gift-giving.

According to later testimony by Gray, he glanced at one of the documents before burning it and was shaken by what he read. "I do not recall the exact language," Gray testified later, "but the text of the cable implicated officials of the Kennedy administration in the assassination of President Diem of South Vietnam."

The cable was a forgery, later admitted to by Watergate conspirator and sometime White House "plumber" E. Howard Hunt Jr., and the full story of its fabrication and purpose has been slow in unfolding.

Now, information in papers filed in U.S. District Court here last week by attorneys for former top White House aide John D. Ehrlichman has created a juxtaposition of events that leaves unclear what, if any, relationships may exist between presidential actions and the Hunt forgery.

The story goes back to a remark made by President Nixon during a press conference he held on Sept. 16, 1971, when South Vietnam was preparing to hold an election with incumbent President Nguyen Van Thieu running unopposed. Mr. Nixon was asked what he thought about using "leverage" to "redeem the situation."

In response, Mr. Nixon said, among other things, that if the suggestion was that "the United States should use its leverage now to overthrow Thieu, I would remind all concerned that the way we got into Vietnam was through overthrowing (President Ngo Dinh) Diem and the complicity in the murder of Diem...."

President Nixon's statement about United States "complicity" in the assassination of Diem did not bring any follow-up questions from reporters or create any stir among them after the press conference. According to one participant in the press conference, the charge of American complicity in Diem's death was common enough in Washington circles that it might easily go unremarked by reporters.

President Nixon may still have been interested two days later, however, in the coup that overthrew Diem and took his life. According to a brief filed in U.S. District Court here last Thursday by lawyers for Ehrlichman, "discussions on Sept. 18, 1971, reflect the President requesting that Ehrlichman have Room 16 employees obtain documents on the Diem coup to prepare for an upcoming press conference."

Room 16, located in the Executive Office Building, was the headquarters of the special White House investigative unit known as "the plumbers."

Two days later, on Sept. 20, 1971, according to the U.S. State Department, White House aide David Young, later revealed to be one of the plumbers, phoned the State Department and asked that Howard Hunt be

given access to cable traffic to and from Saigon for period of April 1 through Nov. 30, 1963—a period that included the coup.

According to State Department spokesman Charles W. Bray, Hunt obtained copies of 240 cables from the State Department.

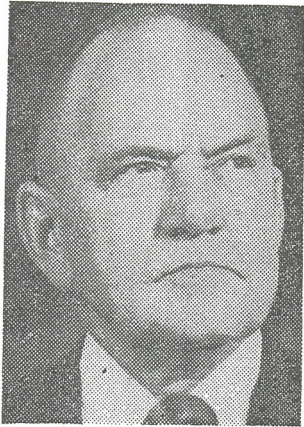
It is not clear whether Hunt has access to documents in the State Department prior to the Sept. 20 call from Young. According to Hunt, whose sworn testimony before a federal grand jury in April 1973 was made public, he discovered while examining State Department cables that "a number of cables were missing."

Among the cables missing, Hunt testified, were some immediately before and after the Diem coup and assassination. Hunt said he checked with the Central Intelligence Agency, which received the same cables, to see if that agency could fill in the gaps. Hunt said he was told that the CIA did not keep cables back to 1963. He said he was told much the same thing at the Pentagon.

"And there came a time when I mentioned this to Mr. Colson, who I had been directing my researches into the—at the particular period—the Vietnamese war, and told him that, in my opinion, a lot of stuff that should have been there had been extracted," Hunt testified.

"He (Colson) said, 'How do you account for that?' And I said, 'Well, some of the cables that they still have on hand at the Department of State have been sent, with date stamps, saying photographed or duplicated for the John F. Kennedy Memorial Library.'

on Forgery of Diem



L. PATRICK GRAY III



PRESIDENT DIEM

... after a glance, the cables were burned

"So I said, 'Well obviously, anybody who had been given access to the Department of State file for the purposes of incorporating them into material held by the J.F.K. Library would also have had opportunity to remove any cables that could have been embarrassing to the Kennedy legatees.

"And he (Colson) said, 'Well, what kind of material have you dug up on the files that would indicate Kennedy complicity?' And I showed him three or four cables that indicated that they had pretty close to pulled the trigger against Premier (sic) Diem's head, but it didn't say so in so many words. Inferentially, one could say there was a high degree of administration complicity in the actual assassination of Diem and his brother.

"And, he said, 'Well, this isn't good enough. Do you think that you could improve on them?'"

Hunt testified that he replied he could, but not without "technical assistance." But, Hunt testified, Colson

replied, "Well, we won't be able to give you any technical help. This is too hot. See what you can do on your own."

Colson initially denied giving Hunt any such order when the story of the forged cable was first made public. Colson later altered his position to say that Hunt may have acted on the basis of a misunderstanding.

Hunt produced two cables that did not satisfy him, but he showed them to Colson anyway, Hunt told the grand jury. Colson "seemed to like" the cables, Hunt testified, so he told Colson.

"These will never stand any kind of scrutiny. Let's be very sure about that."

In any event, sometime during this same period, William Lambert, a reporter for Life Magazine asked Colson about President Nixon's comment about "complicity" in the murder of Diem.

According to Lambert, his conversation with Colson occurred in early October. Lambert said Colson told him that materials showing

additional complicity in the Diem murder on the part of the Kennedy White House had been located. Colson said he would have someone contact Lambert and Lambert recalled that he talked to Hunt on the phone shortly after.

Lambert said he and Hunt spoke first at Lambert's hotel and then again at Hunt's office at the Robert R. Mullen Co., the public relations firm where Hunt worked after leaving the CIA.

Hunt took some photocopies of cables from a manila envelope on his desk and showed them to him, Lambert said. "I started going through them and they didn't mean anything to me," Lambert recalled. "I told Hunt, 'I don't know what you're driving at here. Hunt fished through them and pulled out one and said, 'Here's your story.' And that turned out to be the document that was faked. I was shocked.' What he saw, Lambert said, amounted to a "death warrant" for Diem.

Following these meetings with Hunt, Lambert said, he went through several months after protracted negotiations with Hunt in an effort to get a photocopy of the cable. At the same time, Lambert said, he was trying to contact Colson, but "I couldn't get to him."

Ultimately, nothing came of Lambert's efforts and the matter lapsed until late April, 1973, when Hunt's attempt to forge the cable was revealed publicly.

Among a number of questions that remain unanswered are: Why did President Nixon bring up the Diem assassination in his Sept. 16, 1971, press conference? Why may he

Death Cable

have asked Ehrlichman, as Ehrlichman's lawyers now allege, to obtain documents on the Diem coup "for an upcoming press conference"? For exactly what purpose was Hunt directed to prepare the forged cables implicating President Kennedy in the Diem assassination?

Mystery also still surrounds the Diem assassination itself. No definitive offi-

cial history of what took place has yet been made public, although President Johnson, according to Washington Post White House correspondent Carroll Kilpatrick told reporters during a discussion of Vietnam in August, 1967, "On instructions of ours we assassinated Diem and then, by God, I walked into it. It was too late and we went through one government after another."